I Can Hack It!

By Lt. Duck Wattles

Even two hours after the incident, I still didn't fully realize how close I had come to giving my wife the benefits of my SGLI policy. Let's step back to the night before to see the full story.

As a junior ECMO with just over a year in my first squadron, I thought I knew my limits. If placed in a challenging spot, I could hack it. Then I was placed in that spot. The flight schedule was published, and there I was, briefing and leading a low-level flight early the following morning. The pilot, of course, was the new XO.

When I tracked down the Ops O to question why no one had told me earlier about the flight, he cleared it up by saying, "Yeah, we had to change a few things from the weekly planner. I thought you would like a good deal. You're not turning this down, are you?" Nothing like a good veiled threat to back down a JO. I hadn't flown with the new XO yet, so I thought this was my chance to prove my mettle. I also hadn't flown a low-level since the training command (18 months earlier), but since this was an IR route, and we would be flying no lower than 1,500 feet AGL, there were no more issues to bring up. I pulled a low-level chart from the squadron chart file and planned as much as I could until 2200.

I arrived early to get weather and NOTAMS and to clean up any other details. The first problem arose: typical, poor flying weather for the great Northwest. It was obvious the primary route was not a player that day, but ops had a backup route scheduled for situations like this. Switch plans, switch routes, switch charts. Although the chart for the backup IR route was chummed, it did not have the altitude blocks annotated on the TPC strip portion. The XO pointed out in the brief that if we went IMC on the route, it nearly would be impossible, in the heat of combat, to look at the photocopy from AP-1B (glued to the cover of the chart) to find the top-of-the-altitude block. He told me to annotate the TPC strip portion of the chart with the minimum and maximum altitude for each leg, but in the confusion, I forgot to do it.

So here I was doing my first low-level in 18 months, in bad weather, with an unfamiliar crew, with only a few hours sleep. Yep, I could

Illustration by John W. Williams

hack it! We launched 10 minutes behind another Prowler doing the same mission. We received updates over base frequency about the exact locations where we soon would be.

The first part of the route is off the coast of southern Washington, where we descended from 17,000 feet. The weather was predominantly VMC, but as we looked over land, conditions worsened. As we pressed in, we got frequent weather updates from the crew 10 minutes ahead. Just as we crossed the coastline, they called, "Hey guys, this weather isn't going to work. We're leaving the route at point echo."

Thinking we would do the same, I answered, "Roger, thanks for the update," just as we approached a mass of low-lying clouds on the route centerline.

I felt the XO's eyes on me when he said, "Well, are you going to call center?"

As I tried to think of what I was going to say, we entered the cloud mass. I could hear the tension in his voice when he asked me what the top of the block was. I scrambled with a chart that still was largely unfamiliar to me and tried to discern what the ground elevation was under our jet.

A few seconds later, he asked even more urgently, "What's a safe altitude around here?"

Flabbergasted, I started a new search for a route elevation that would keep us clear of any obstacles that might loom ahead. As the pit in my stomach grew tighter and tighter, he executed a three-G pull. We broke out of the clouds and coordinated a new flight plan, with an instrument approach at Portland, before returning to NAS Whidbey Island. Finally, catching up with the aircraft, I tried to replay the events from the first part of the flight as we made an uneventful recovery.

It wasn't until the debrief when we reconstructed our flight path and replayed the chain of events, that reality sunk in. As we approached the clouds, the pilot was trying to get me to assert myself as ECMO-1 in coordinating our departure from the IR route with ATC. He had waited too long, and I didn't take the hint. We were wings level at 1,500 feet, just below the 2,000-foot top of the altitude block for the previous over-water leg when we went IMC. When he asked for the top of the block, I didn't understand what he wanted. During the debrief, he had told me that, from the second he executed the sharp pullup, the LAWS (low altitude warning system) tone started going off. Surprised, I looked at the back-seater to see him slowly nodding his head. I was more shocked to hear the radalt had bottomed out around 250 feet AGL, in the climb, in IMC. A quick review of the IR route revealed a 2,200-foot peak on centerline where we pulled off the route. We had been seconds away.

Many CRM and ORM lessons learned can come from this. Don't try to perform beyond your level of experience. "I thought I could hack it," is not what I want written on my headstone.

Planning a high-intensity training event is just as important, if not more important, than the actual flight. I should have been intimately familiar with every aspect of the route of flight. When you're traveling 7 miles per minute at low altitude in uneven terrain, there is no time to search for critical information printed in a microscopic font.

Finally, we've all heard that a direct suggestion from the CO or XO is equal to an order. When the XO (who has more than 3,000 flight hours to back up his ideas) suggests adding pertinent information to the chart, failure to follow through may result in disaster. Fortunately for three aviators, this flight didn't.

Lt. Wattles flies with VAQ-133.